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# AUTHENTICITY, A CREDIBLE CONCEPT?

MARIE-THÉRÈSE VAN THOOR



- 1. Rietveld Schröder House, Utrecht, interior of the upper floor during restoration in 1985-1986. Architect Bertus Mulder removed any remaining finishing layers from walls and ceiling (Bertus Mulder archive, Centraal Museum Utrecht)

Over forty years ago, in 1978, an entire edition of *Bulletin KNOB* was devoted to the subject of architectural restoration. The articles reflected the authors' views on the philosophy and theory of restoration, and it is interesting to see that even then the concept of authenticity figured prominently in the debate. Linked to the related concept of 'authenticity value', terms such as 'material genuineness of the historical substance', 'authenticity of form', 'finishing', as well as 'proportion', 'use of light' and even 'authentic atmosphere' passed in review.<sup>1</sup>



2. Van Nelle Design Factory Rotterdam, interior, 2014 (Rijksdienst voor het Cultureel Erfgoed)

In this issue, while Kees Somer focuses on that 1978 discussion about restoration principles, Jaap Evert Abrahamse, Reinout Rutte and Lara Schrijver address the meaning of authenticity in the architecture and urban design of the same period, 1970-1980.<sup>2</sup> Nowadays everyone has an idea of what is meant by an authentic atmosphere, recognizability, smallness of

scale, identity and character. And even in this age of digital renderings and algorithms, it is usually still possible to imagine what is meant by 'sense of place'. But can we actually explain what it means, and are those of us active in the world of architecture and heritage employing the same definitions and criteria? The *Nederlandse Encyclopedie* lists no fewer than sixteen





meanings of authenticity. The four most important are: genuineness, singularity, credibility and originality. We also read that 'Authenticity is a quality mark'.<sup>3</sup> This is undoubtedly one of the reasons why the term, like 'woolmark', is used so often. Unfortunately, that can also prove counterproductive, resulting in a concept that is not only hard to pin down, but also lacks

credibility – as when the Government Architect Floris Alkemade describes *Panorama Nederland* (2018), the Board of Government Advisers' long-term perspective on the spatial planning of the Netherlands, as an 'authentic vision of the future'.<sup>4</sup> After reading the articles in this thematic issue of *Bulletin KNOB*, the meaning of authenticity may strike the reader as pretty fluid and perhaps even disingenuous. In these articles authenticity is examined from various angles, mostly in relation to dealing with spatial heritage and the difficult-to-define relationship with authenticity. According to Lex Bosman, the contemporary concept of authenticity is extremely complicated, and as good as useless when applied to Antiquity and the Middle Ages.<sup>5</sup> Finally, let's not forget I would just like to mention the 'most important' monuments: world heritage sites. Their authenticity has been 'proven' by their very designation as 'World Heritage'.

#### OUTSTANDING UNIVERSAL VALUES

To qualify for a place on UNESCO's World Heritage List, cultural or natural heritage properties need to possess values that are so exceptional that they transcend national interests: World Heritage and its preservation are deemed to serve the interests of all humanity.<sup>6</sup> These global values are referred to by the English term 'Outstanding Universal Values' or OUV. Heritage with outstanding universal values must meet at least one of the ten selection criteria in the *Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention*.<sup>7</sup> The guidelines include a separate section devoted to authenticity, in combination with integrity. Article 78 states: 'To be deemed of Outstanding Universal Value, a property must also meet the conditions of integrity and/or authenticity and must have an adequate protection and management system to ensure its safeguarding.' Further on in the text it is made clear that *all* potential 'World Heritage Sites' must satisfy the conditions of 'integrity', which is described as 'a measure of the wholeness and the intactness of the natural and/or cultural heritage and its attributes'.<sup>8</sup> Contrary to what we might expect after reading Steffen Nijhuis's article on the huge diversity of landscape authenticity, the measure of authenticity in World Heritage only applies to cultural heritage properties, which are selected based on one (or more) of the first six criteria.<sup>9</sup> 'Depending on the type of cultural heritage, and its cultural context, properties may be understood to meet the conditions of authenticity if their cultural values ... are truthfully and credibly expressed through a variety of attributes' (article 82).<sup>10</sup> This diversity of attributes is wide-ranging: form and design; materials and substance; use and function; traditions, techniques and management systems; location and setting; language and other forms of intangible heritage;

spirit and feeling, and other internal and external factors.

This creates a direct link with *The Nara Document on Authenticity* (1994), in which the evaluation of authenticity is based on the same wide range of [information] sources.<sup>11</sup> The Nara Document was drawn up because the international heritage world wanted to provide a broader base reflecting global cultural diversity and the concomitant variation in (the management of) heritage. For that reason, according to article 11 of this document, judgements of values or authenticity should no longer be based on fixed criteria.<sup>12</sup> As Gabri van Tussenbroek argues elsewhere in this issue, it would seem that according to Nara Conference thinking, everything is possible, so long as the OUV can be convincingly *recounted* from within the culture to which they belong.<sup>13</sup>

#### AUTHENTICITY AND THE MODERN MOVEMENT

In 2019, in an article about the restorations of the Rietveld Schröder House (1924) in Utrecht, I wrote that the 'Nara' had opened the door to wide-ranging and often personal interpretations of heritage.<sup>14</sup> The decisions made by the architect Bertus Mulder (b. 1929) during the restorations of the Rietveld Schröder House in the 1970s and '80s were certainly not in line with the then prevailing principles of the Venice Charter (1964).<sup>15</sup> While supervising the restoration of the exterior Mulder removed large sections of the existing facade finish. A decade later he took an even more rigorous approach to the interior, stripping off all the still largely original finish coats on the upper floor (fig. 1). It was precisely that materiality that Gerrit Rietveld (1888-1964) considered crucial to the spatial *experience*. Mulder, however, regarded the material as secondary; for him the recreation of an original spatial *image* was paramount. This view was based not so much on 'respect for the original material and on authentic documents', as stipulated by the Venice Charter, but reflected his own – authentic? – interpretation of Rietveld's principles. Because of this, it was not just original material that disappeared. The historicity, the genuineness and the testimonies of the place and the house, in the sense that Freek Schmidt describes in this issue, were entirely disregarded.<sup>16</sup>

Yet these radical restorations did not prevent the Rietveld Schröder House's inscription on the World Heritage List in 2000. According to the nomination dossier, the house had retained the authenticity of the design concept and the structure. It further claimed that 'in essence' the monument satisfied the authenticity criteria in every respect.<sup>17</sup> These criteria were not adopted from the Nara Document, but were based on four aspects of authenticity that apply in particular to Modern Movement buildings: authenticity of idea (the

original design concept); of form, spatial organization and exterior; of construction and details, and, surprisingly enough, authenticity of materials.

Noor Mens explains in this issue why, from the 1980s onwards, the preservation of modern heritage buildings not only required a widening of the evaluation frameworks, but also strategies for dealing with the often poor material condition of this heritage.<sup>18</sup> It appears that in this area, authenticity of materials, rather than being interpreted as authenticity of the existing historical substance, refers implicitly to the *original* materials and to the design (concept). Restoration architect Wessel de Jonge (b. 1957) speaks of 'design authenticity' in this context.<sup>19</sup> Consequently, Modern Movement monuments are deemed 'authentic' according to different criteria and treated differently from monuments from preceding periods.

From 2000, De Jonge was the coordinating architect of the restoration and restructuring of Rotterdam's Van Nelle Factory (1925-1931, J.A. Brinkman and L.C. van der Vlugt), which was transformed into Van Nelle Design Factory (fig. 2). In 2014 this complex was added to the World Heritage List. The former factory for coffee, tea and tobacco is regarded as a good example of adaptive reuse and, according to the UNESCO nomination dossier, has survived the restructuring with its material and intangible authenticity intact.<sup>20</sup> According to the authors of the dossier, this is manifested in each of the various properties mentioned above: form; design; materials and substance; use and function; (day)light; location and setting; traditions, technique and management systems; other internal and external factors and other forms of intangible heritage. 'Also from a conceptual perspective, the integrity of the ensemble – and the related spirit of collectivity and creativity – forms the basis for the present use as Van Nelle Factory'; a fine description of 'spirit and feeling' in the 'Statement of Authenticity'.<sup>21</sup> The height of authenticity, it would seem, despite the fact that the complex had undergone substantial alterations and renovations.

#### AUTHENTICITY AS A UNIQUE MARK OF QUALITY

Ten years ago, in an article on 'Authenticity and spirituality', Wim Denslagen argued that the multiplicity of meanings, the freedom of choices and lack of clarity with respect to the concept of authenticity could lead to arbitrariness. His definition was short and sweet: 'Authentic is the surviving object, original is the original object'.<sup>22</sup> Denslagen believed we would do better to replace the confusing concept of authenticity with 'values'. But isn't the notion of 'values' just as arbitrary and fluid as authenticity? In her inaugural lecture as Professor of Heritage & Values at TU Delft in 2019, Ana Pereira Roders suggested that: 'We can define our own





3. Streetscape in Kyoto: a renovated, authentic *machiya* surrounded by more recent architecture (photo Hielkje Zijlstra, 2015)

values, or adopt the values of others'.<sup>23</sup> Defining values is tricky, yet adopting the values of others is even more complicated – or more arbitrary. And that is probably not what the Nara Document or the UNESCO Guidelines intend. Acknowledgement of global cultural diversity may well lead to a widening of the concept, but it still needed to be rigorously defined within each culture. A few years ago a joint project by TU Delft and the Kyoto Institute of Technology (KIT) focused on the restoration, renovation and potential conversion of

traditional Japanese houses, the so-called *machiya* (fig. 3). Authenticity was a frequent topic of discussion and Kazuto Kasahara, architect and assistant professor at the KIT, could not have put it better when he wrote that: '... we should avoid referring to Japanese traditional culture out of context and using it to justify or explain non-Japanese architectural interventions.'<sup>24</sup> Authenticity can certainly be a mark of quality, but only within one's own cultural context and only if a clear and credible definition is applied.

1 See K. Somer, 'Material authenticity and historical falsification. The knob and authentic historical substance', *Bulletin KNOB* 119 (2020) 4, paginanummers; 'Discussie over de problematiek van de architectuurrestauratie', *Bulletin KNOB* 77 (1978) 3-4, 179-194.  
2 J.E. Abrahamse and R. Rutte, 'The house as mass product. Authenticity in post-war housing estates' and L. Schrijver, 'Always the real thing. Authenticity in the age of digital reproduction', *Bulletin KNOB* 119 (2020) 4, paginanummers en paginanummers.  
3 [www.encyclo.nl/begrip/Authenticiteit](http://www.encyclo.nl/begrip/Authenticiteit).  
4 F. Alkemade, *De toekomst van Nederland. De kunst van richting te veranderen*, Bussum 2020, 9. See also: [www.collegevanrijksadviseurs.nl/projecten/panorama-nederland](http://www.collegevanrijksadviseurs.nl/projecten/panorama-nederland).

5 L. Bosman, 'Authenticity and material. A consideration of the concept based on examples from (late) Antiquity and the Middle Ages', *Bulletin KNOB* 119 (2020) 4, paginanummers.  
6 *Bitter en Zoet. Advies van de Expertgroep beoordeling werelderfgoenominaties*. Advisory report commissioned by the director-general of Culture and Media in the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, March 2015.  
7 UNESCO, *Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention*, I.I.E, WHC.19/01 10 July 2019, 26-29: [whc.unesco.org/en/guidelines/](http://whc.unesco.org/en/guidelines/).  
8 UNESCO 2019 (note 7), 26.  
9 S. Nijhuis, 'Landscape authenticity. The landscape as living system, history and spatial experience', *Bulletin KNOB* 119 (2020) 4, paginanummers.

10 UNESCO 2019 (note 7), 27.  
11 ICOMOS, *The Nara Document on Authenticity* (1994): [icomos.org/charters/nara-e.pdf](http://icomos.org/charters/nara-e.pdf).  
12 ICOMOS 1994 (note 11), 47.  
13 G. van Tussenbroek, 'Reconstruction and resistance. On material authenticity', *Bulletin KNOB* 119 (2020) 4, paginanummers.  
14 M.T. van Thoor, 'The restorations van het Rietveld Schröder House. A reflection', *Bulletin KNOB* 118 (2019) 4, 15-31.  
15 ICOMOS, *International Charter for the Conservation and Restoration of Monuments and Sites (The Venice Charter)*, IInd International Congress of Architects and Technicians of Historic Monuments, Venice 1964. Adopted by ICOMOS in 1965.  
16 F. Schmidt, 'Genuine architecture. On authenticity and adaptive reuse', *Bulletin*

- KNOB* 119 (2020) 4, paginanummers.
- 17 R. de Jong, I. van Zijl and B. Mulder, *Rietveld Schröderhuis, Utrecht/(Rietveld Schröder House, Utrecht) The Netherlands*, Utrecht/Zeist 1999, 16-17: [whc.unesco.org/uploads/nominations/965.pdf](http://whc.unesco.org/uploads/nominations/965.pdf).
  - 18 N. Mens, 'Form and context. On the role of authenticity in the evaluation of modern heritage', *Bulletin KNOB* 119 (2020) 4, paginanummers.
  - 19 C. van Emstede, *Waardestelling in de Nederlandse monumentenzorg 1981-2009*, doctoral thesis TU Delft, 2015, 232: [books.bk.tudelft.nl/index.php/press/catalog/book/450](http://books.bk.tudelft.nl/index.php/press/catalog/book/450). See also: D. van den Heuvel et al. (eds.), *The Challenge of Change. Dealing with the Legacy of the Modern Movement. Proceedings of the 10th International DOCOMOMO Conference*, Delft 2008; S. Stroux et al. (eds.), *Reco.mo.mo. Hoe echt is namaak, hoe dierbaar is het origineel?*, Delft 2011.
  - 20 M. Kuipers and T. Knibbeler et al., *Van Nelfabriek Rotterdam, Nomination File. Nomination by the Kingdom of the Netherlands for Inscription on the Unesco World Heritage List*, Rotterdam 2013: [whc.unesco.org/uploads/nominations/1441.pdf](http://whc.unesco.org/uploads/nominations/1441.pdf).
  - 21 Kuipers and Knibbeler et al. 2013 (note 20), 103-105, esp. 104.
  - 22 W. Denslagen, 'Authenticiteit en spiritualiteit', *Bulletin KNOB* 109 (2010) 4, 135-140, esp. 138.
  - 23 A. Pereira Roders, *WALL-E. Value . Conserv . Evolve*, inaugural lecture TU Delft, 27 November 2019.
  - 24 K. Kasahara, 'Machiya Today. Concepts and Methods of Renovation Design', in: M.T. van Thoor and S. Stroux (eds.), *Heritage, History and Design Between East and West. A Close-UP on Kyoto's Urban Fabric*, TU Delft 2018, 53: [books.bk.tudelft.nl/index.php/press/catalog/view/isbn.9789463660280/724/565-1](http://books.bk.tudelft.nl/index.php/press/catalog/view/isbn.9789463660280/724/565-1).

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Several of the contributions to this issue on authenticity conclude by asking whether the concept of authenticity is a credible criterion. According to UNESCO's *Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention*, a monument designated as world heritage possesses 'Outstanding Universal Values' (ouV). It also meets the conditions of integrity and authenticity, at any rate when it comes to *cultural* heritage. In accordance with *The Nara Document on Authenticity* (1994), and taking account of global cultural diversity, authenticity can be based on a wide variety of attributes.

Two Dutch World Heritage monuments, the Riet-

veld Schröder House (1924) and the Van Nelle Factory (1925-1931), belong to the architecture of the Modern Movement. In the nomination dossiers for these two heritage buildings authenticity was substantiated in different ways. But in both cases, as has become customary for Modern Movement monuments, 'design authenticity' was deemed of great importance. Has the concept of authenticity been expanded to such an extent that it has ended up being applied arbitrarily? In this author's view, authenticity can most certainly be a criterion of quality, provided a clear and credible definition is employed within the specific cultural context.